

Shifting balances in a 'craft community': The mat weavers of Pattamadai, South India

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This article seeks to critically examine conceptualisations of community through the study of a 'traditional craft industry' in the Tamil town of Pattamadai. Arguing through detailed ethnographic analysis that both the substantialist and constructivist models of community ignore individual agency as well as tension within a group characterised as a 'craft community', this article attempts to present a nuanced portrait of a group of people bound together by locality, kinship and shared occupation, yet pursuing their own individual goals, especially in response to development interventions. The article focuses on three interconnected issues: (i) the way in which community is conceptualised in the context of 'traditional craft groups'; (ii) the lived experience of one particular group of craft producers; and (iii) the role of individuals in the interface between ideology and practice.

This article seeks to critically examine conceptualisations of community through a detailed study of a 'traditional craft industry' in the Tamil town of Pattamadai. I will focus on the powerful idea of the craft community, which has dominated discussions of rural artisanal work since the beginning of the 20th century and continues to inform craft development in contemporary India. I will argue that this notion, which drives so much

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of social science as well as popular and developmental thought on craft in India, is in part a romantic fiction bearing little relation to the ways in which craft producers conceptualise their identities and interact with each other. However, the realms of ideas and of practices do not form separate and parallel paths; nor does the former merely provide an ideological icing for the latter. They influence each other, especially in the case of development practice. The paradigm of the craft community, embedded as it is in power relations, affects both local organising practices and ways in which it is acceptable for producers to represent themselves, and interact with the wider nation. This produces situations which can aptly be termed 'battlefields of knowledge' (Long and Long 1992). I will focus here on three interconnected issues: (i) the way in which community is conceptualised in the context of 'traditional craft groups'; (ii) the lived experience of one particular group of craft producers; and (iii) the role of individuals in the interface between ideology and practice.

As Jodhka points out, the notion of 'community' is frequently invoked in India in the official discourses of development (Jodhka 1999). Community, like civil society, is considered a good thing—a way of mobilising groups that are roughly egalitarian and of helping them to help themselves. However, 'in most of these discourses the internal structure of the supposed communities invariably gets elided in favour of a notion of moral bonds and cultural authenticity' (ibid.). Carol Upadhyia (2001) identifies two ways in which community has been conceptualised in studies of India. Within the 'primordialist' or what she calls the 'substantivist' model, communities are regarded as natural groupings based on ties of shared blood, language, history, territory and culture. She argues that the idea of community gained importance as the result of a long tradition of imagining India through categories that make it the oppositional other of the 'West'. 'Culturally' defined groups thus came to be identified as the authentic units of social organisation in India in contrast to the associational interactions believed to characterise Western or 'modern' societies. The community in this paradigm is based on the *gemeinschaft* model (Tonnies 1974 [1935]), that is, it is pre-modern and conservative, characterised by affective bonds; indeed, the growth of modernity is always inimical to community (Upadhyia 2001: 34). Constructivists on

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the other hand see communities not as anachronistic remainders of India's pre-colonial past but as invented by discursive processes, policies and actions of the colonial state. This position, as Upadhyia points out, is problematic. While bringing communities within the purview of history, it has

a tendency to regard social identities as discursively constructed while ignoring the concrete political or economic structures within which such construction takes place...an absence of agency on the part of the colonised, an overemphasis on knowledge systems and discourses of the state and less attention to the ways in which such discourses get played out in actual social life (Upadhyia 2001: 41).

Both the primordialist and constructivist models tend to ignore the individual. In the former, all members of the community are seen as essentially alike, united by a common culture which differentiates them from others and is the source of their social identity. In the latter, both individual and group are seen as acted upon rather than acting. This has been challenged by scholars. In his book *The warrior merchants* (1984), Mines shows how the organisation of the Kaikkoolar weavers changed in response to the roles played by leading individuals, who were in turn responding to changes in the political economy. Leaders created different kinds of organisations—*naadus*, cooperatives, caste associations, and so on—which, when successful, attracted followers. Such associations were responses to the larger political climate. Mines' work shows that conceptualising 'the community' as a static entity based on primordial ties and unchanging except when buffeted by external forces is misleading, and in urgent need of critical questioning. At the same time, it is equally misleading to think of categories such as the craft community as discursive constructions that are reified by particular relations of power and/or as purely coming from the outside. A more subtle analysis that incorporates questions of agency—both individual and collective—in craft-producing groups is urgently required. This is what this paper attempts to do.

I

Crafting communities

In the metamorphosis of the green korai growing wild on the banks of the Tamaraparani, into the wonder that is the Pattamadai mat lies the

genius of the *paramparic* Indian craftsman. His conceptual harmony which so effortlessly weaves function and aesthetics together into objects of superb craftsmanship, his empathy with the moods and rhythms of nature, from which much of his work is crafted as well as total dedication to his calling spells the very essence of India's craft heritage, be it the minakari and jadau jewellery of Jaipur, the namdahs and carpets of Kashmir, the shola pith craft of Bengal or the stone carving of Karnataka. Or the serene allure and brilliant workmanship of the fine Pattamadai mat.¹

The constituency of craft is extremely wide, and has been since its usage in the current sense in 18th-century Britain. Greenhalgh discusses how opposition to the forces of industrialisation saw an emerging nostalgia for rural communities and the simple products they made for local use. These products, characterised as craft, were grouped together with handmade luxury decorative objects manufactured for distant and elite markets. In the same group were to be found those objects that did not fit into the increasingly exclusive category of fine arts. The term 'craft' therefore came to denote disparate kinds of objects which, though grouped together, had little in common (Greenhalgh 1997). In India, ritual art forms—whether commodified or not—are identified as craft, grouped together with handmade objects that have been made for the market for decades, if not for centuries, and with newer kinds of objects which have benefited from design and manufacturing interventions.

The notion of the pan-Indian craft heritage stems in part from the idealism of the Arts and Crafts Movement and its influence on Indian thought in the early 20th century. Reacting against urbanisation and the disruption of villages following the industrial revolution, thinkers and writers in England, notably William Morris and John Ruskin, focused on the politics of work, pleading for a return to traditional modes of production where the worker was not alienated from the products of his labour and where creativity could flourish. These influential ideas spread beyond Europe and were taken up in India which, with its living traditions of craftsmanship, became one of the utopias of the Arts and Crafts Movement (Mitter 1994). A representative sample of the writings on this subject by William Morris, George Birdwood, Ernst Binfield Havell and C.R. Ashbee may be found in the Foreword and Appendices of *The Indian craftsman* by A.K. Coomaraswamy (1909).

¹ P. Chari, 'The wonder of the Pattamadai mat'. *The Hindu*, 25 February 1996, p. 15.

In India culturally-rooted resistance to colonialism in the early 20th century was added to the trope of craft. During and after the *swadeshi* or home industry movement of the first two decades of the 20th century, during which Indians all over the country and particularly in Bengal opposed British rule, artisanal manufactures were transformed into symbols of the nation, particularly by Gandhi. Craft continues to retain an important position in the ideology of the nation. Selected village industries and handicrafts are a crucial component of the nation-building project and are important in cultural diplomacy. Crafts are seen as quintessentially Indian, transcending regional variations, embodying a national aesthetic. As a Government of India brochure on craft development would have it, 'There is nothing so Indian as Indian Handicrafts' (cited in Durrans 1982).

G.M. Birdwood, writing in 1880, drew a beautiful picture of the Indian village where the villagers, including artisans, work all day at their respective tasks, coming together in the evening for music and feasting. The next day the same unchanging schedule is repeated (Birdwood 1880: 59–60). This portrait, pleasing and harmonious, ignores both horizontal and vertical divisions in Indian village life, yet it continues to be influential well into the 21st century, especially in the context of artisans.² Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (1903–88) and Pupul Jayakar (1915–97), all of whom wrote on craft and whose writings were extremely influential in the revival of traditional Indian artisanal work, celebrated the anonymity of the craft producer, contrasting this with the individualistic artist of the 'West'. In *Earth mother* Jayakar wrote:

the rural craft expression, the desi, by its very nature demanded a total anonymity of name. It reflected the familiar unchanging forms of rural life, its simple needs, its links with archaic magic and ritual (Jayakar 1989).

This idea of the village has its antecedents in the colonial period. Colonial ethnographies characterised villages as unchanging and economically

² Sir George Birdwood was professor of Anatomy and Physiology in Bombay, though his interests in India extended far beyond medical practice and study. Inspired by the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement, Birdwood contrasted the evils of Western industrialism with the ideal village communities of India and formulated policies for the preservation of crafts skill in India and the protection of artisans from Western influences.

self-sufficient—indeed, India came to be known by, and as, its villages. Jhodka shows how the Indian village in the colonial discourse was ‘a self-sufficient community with communal ownership of land ... marked by a functional integration of various occupational groups. Things as diverse as stagnation, simplicity and social harmony were attributed to the village’ (Jodhka 1997: 4). For Gandhi, the village was a crucial aspect of Indian identity. ‘I would say that if the village perishes, India will perish too. It will be no more India.’³ Gandhi’s picture of the Indian village was a normative one wherein caste and other hierarchical divisions would be erased, people would be gainfully occupied and village industries would supply primarily local but also national needs. Village reconstruction was crucial in the recovery of the lost self. While Gandhi laid emphasis on the individual as agent of change, he focused on the urban Indian or the Congressman who would move to the village and bring about the desired change. The village studies of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s focused on villages as sites of traditional, even vanishing, practices. Conceived as ‘little communities’ (Redfield 1955), villages were often studied in isolation from the larger regional, national and global networks of which they formed a part. In contemporary development discourse and practice, the villager is a subject to be instructed, taught and helped.

Few studies of Indian villages have explored the worlds of Indian artisans in any detail. For the most part, artisans are dealt with as close-knit traditional communities bound by kinship, caste and occupational ties, linked with other communities by the ‘*jajmani* system’. The material relations of production and exchange are thus subsumed within the structure of caste and community (Fuller 1989). Artisans are also studied as victims of the processes of colonisation, industrialisation, globalisation and urbanisation, and therefore as needing ‘development’. Some scholars have focused on ritual aspects of artisanal work or on issues of craft and identity (Brouwer 1995; Frater 1995; Mehta 1997).⁴ The focus here is on a moral order reproduced through highly culturally-specific ideologies

³ *Harijan*, 29 August 1936.

⁴ Mehta’s focus on Muslim cloth weavers (1997) offers an interesting contrast to my work. For the Labbai Muslims of Pattamadai, weaving and worship are not linked. While weavers say the *Bismillah* before setting up the loom for a new mat, something which they do when commencing any task, there is little reference to sacred texts or ritual aspects of weaving. I learned how to weave whilst doing fieldwork. For a discussion of weaving, work and the body in Pattamadai, see my forthcoming paper ‘Learning, doing’.

and practices relating to work. Every person has a role within the production process. The craft object is seen as the result of unchanging physical and social processes. It embodies the values of the group. Individual rural artisans continue to be invisible in many studies on craft, with the notable exceptions of work on traditional painters and sculptors (for example, Bundgaard 1999; Jain 1997). The national awards for excellence in craft production do recognise individual effort, but as I will show later, are also based on specific ideas of the craft community and its development.⁵

It is mainly social, political and economic elites who are concerned with 'craft'; for otherwise marginalised artisans, commercial craft production is a means of livelihood and the trope of craft provides a means to engage with these socially and often physically distant sections of society. Ways of thinking about craft were, and continue to remain, an uneasy mix of the moral and the economic.⁶ Crafts are important in contemporary India both for their income-generation potential, and for the foreign exchange earnings they bring (Vijayagopalan 1993). Craft development forms part of the agenda of the national planning mechanism.

Not all craft producers are from hereditary artisanal groups, though the products they make may be, indeed often are, termed 'traditional'. People, especially women, may be trained in craftwork as part of income-generation programmes initiated by the state or by non-governmental organisations. Here, craft is explicitly tied to development and seen as instrumental in alleviating or reducing poverty (see, for example, Rajasekhar 2002). Whether or not from a hereditary artisanal group, the craft producer is often characterised in the general and development literature both as a representative of the 'real or traditional India', to be protected from the evils of capitalism and faceless mass production, and as someone who needs to be encouraged to join the mainstream economy and compete within it. Craft development programmes often involve a large amount of community building; indeed, craft development may be described as community development through the medium of objects.

⁵ For a more detailed account of the national awards for master craftspeople, see Venkatesan (2002b); also Bundgaard (1996).

⁶ Moral, because support for craft is seen as a good thing in and of itself; economic, because an important aim of craft development is the generation of income for India's rural poor, especially for disadvantaged groups such as women and lower castes.

II

The 'craft community' in Pattamadai

If, as Benedict Anderson has pointed out, the nation is an imagined community (Anderson 1991), part of what gives the Indian nation a kind of unity over time is its 'craft heritage'. In the previous section I argued that the idea of the craft community stems, on the one hand, from a longing for the small face-to-face intimate worlds of pre-industrial life and, on the other, from particular readings of India's villages and social relations within them. It is also influenced by larger discourses about community in India. In this section I will discuss how the mat weavers of Pattamadai have been classified as a craft community, and what that entails. I will show that conceptualisations of community within the Indian craft context incorporate both the idea of community as an actualised social form and as an idea or quality of sociality. Community is here translated as collective identity, rather than interaction (Amit 2002: 3). There is thus both the expectation of a *gemeinschaft* type of sociality within craft groups and of larger commonalities of experience, concerns and empathy between different groups of people identified as craft producers.

The weaving of high-quality mats on looms has been carried on in Pattamadai since at least the end of the 19th century. Unlike coarse mats produced for general household use throughout Tamil Nadu, Pattamadai mats feel like silk cloth and are skill- and labour-intensive in their manufacture; even lower-quality mats take up to a week each to weave, and higher-quality mats can take a month. (This does not include the time taken to prepare the raw materials.) Weaving is mostly carried out in the home, and both men and women weave, though more women than men weave today. The mats have always been commodities for sale, usually in distant and elite markets (Pate 1917; Rao 1929). While weaving is spoken of as a traditional occupation, it holds an ambivalent position in people's narratives—both as a source of pride, and as instantiating the lack of other choices.

How did the mat weavers become identified as belonging to a craft community? The answer to this question reveals the top-down nature of craft in India. A Pattamadai mat was awarded a bronze medal at the Delhi Exhibition of 1902–1903 (Watt 1904). While this made the mats known outside the region, the critical event came in 1952 when V.A.K. Rangan, an agent of the Madras-based Royal Insurance Company, originally from

the Tirunelveli region where Pattamadai is located, decided to commission a mat commemorating the coronation of Elizabeth II and gift it to the Queen. Palace protocol forbade the giving of coronation gifts by individuals, so the mat was given as a gift of the Mat Weavers Association of Pattamadai, presented through Mr Rangan.⁷ Exhibited before being sent to England, the mat was seen by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, the founder president of the national handicrafts development agency and later also of the pan-Indian craft development organisation, the Crafts Council of India. Chattopadhyay visited Pattamadai and encouraged the weavers to form a handicrafts cooperative society (Nambiar 1964). The weavers were now identified as craft producers, and as constituting a craft community. It is crucial to remember that this was not a *self*-identification on the part of the weavers, but a way of representing themselves and their work primarily in the public sphere.

The majority of mat weavers hail from the Labbai sub-group of Tamil Muslims. In discourses about mat weaving outside Pattamadai, it is they who form the 'craft community'. Along with mat weaving in which both women and men are engaged, key livelihood options for Labbai males include ritual specialisation and petty trading, both within and outside Pattamadai. Several men have also migrated to Saudi Arabia and other West Asian countries on short-term labour contracts which last up to three years at a time. Men also travel to other countries around the Indian Ocean. Few members of the group own agricultural land or are involved in agricultural work. Both parallel and cross-cousin marriages are common in the Labbai community, and most Labbais in the town are related to each other in multiple ways. Though most women migrate to their marital homes after marriage, several return to Pattamadai and live there, either in their parental homes or separately with their children, while their husbands work and live in cities within and beyond India, making periodic visits. Most Labbai women are engaged in household-based income-generation activity. Women often say that the reason why they do not accompany their husbands to other places even if the husbands have permanent employment is because 'in Pattamadai everyone is related (*ellam sondakarakar*) so women can move freely around the Labbai areas which we cannot do in Bombay, or Madras'. One woman said, 'I can

⁷ According to some weavers, the Mat Weavers Association was especially formed for the purposes of this gift. Certainly, it seems clear that an older association formed to facilitate access to raw materials, which had since become defunct, was revived for this purpose (see Nambiar 1964).

work here in Pattamadai. I can go out of my home, see others, get the materials I need for weaving mats or for rolling *beedis* [leaf cigarettes]. I get bored in other places.⁸

Several characteristics of community are clearly visible among the Labbais of Pattamadai. These include a shared sense of identity based on locality, occupation (including but not restricted to weaving), religion and kin ties. Most Labbais personally know most other Labbais living in the town. Does this translate into a 'craft community'? In some ways it does, but I will argue here that the idealised *gemeinschaft* notion of community also obscures important aspects of social organisation and interaction within the mat-weaving industry. These are characterised by what might be termed cooperative competition wherein mat weavers and traders who might compete in some areas, work together in others, forming short-term alliances and strategic groupings.

Locality constitutes an important aspect of belonging. This is true both within the Labbai group and in Pattamadai as a whole. The fame of the mat-weaving industry is a matter of pride for most residents and also for those who have left the town. During my fieldwork in Pattamadai, most people, Labbai and others, would ask me what I was doing there and then provide the answer themselves—you must be here because of the mats. However, the pride is mixed with other concerns, especially in the current political climate. One Brahmin man was proud that the finest mats in the country were woven by the Muslims of Pattamadai; however, and almost in the same breath, he added: 'The Muslim areas are terrorist dens.' A policeman warned a group of visiting students wishing to learn about village life and crafts in 1998 against going to the Muslim areas. Another policeman told me in 1999 that he had written a short treatise on the mat-weaving industry as it was a matter of pride (*perumaiyana vishayam*) to him that the mats were so famous. Like other small towns and villages in India, there is both a sense of oneness through coming from the same place and, at the same time, vertical and horizontal divisions based on caste or group identity. Even the different kinds of craft producers in the town—mat weavers, potters, carpenters and cloth weavers—rarely interact across caste or other structural boundaries except within the context of micro-economic transactions. A mat weaver might go to a carpenter or a blacksmith to commission or get repaired a loom component. Such interactions take place without any reference to the

⁸ She used the English word 'bored' (*bore adikkum*).

concept of 'craft'. Except in commercial establishments (teashops, shops), in the mosque, and in service provision, there is often little interaction between people belonging to different groups. This is especially true in the case of women, as neighbourhoods too are broadly divided along caste or caste-like lines.

Though both groups are Muslim, Labbai and Rauther neighbourhoods in Pattamadai are more or less distinct. Though some Rauthers own agricultural land and other assets, several live on subsistence incomes and have little financial security. Inter-marriage between the two groups is, according to most people, permitted though not common (cf. Fanselow 1997). People bring up this question of inter-marriage to show that the divisions between Labbai and Rauther are not caste-like. Rather, they are based on the historical origins of the groups and irrelevant insofar as marriage and commensality are concerned. The unity of the *jumma* or the Muslim congregation is a matter of pride and is often held up as a contrast to the divisiveness of the caste system in Hinduism. Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that Labbais are of lower status than Rauthers. One of the traditional Labbai occupations is the performance of rituals for client households, for which they are paid in kind and/or cash. This provides an irregular means of income. A weaver, Wahab, told me that this was because Labbais acted as ritual specialists not just at wedding and other auspicious events, but also at death ceremonies. For this reason he had resisted learning the requisite skills as a boy. Some Rauthers, he said, did not like to look at a Labbai first thing in the morning, or before embarking on important work. The similarities to Hindu ideas of pollution are striking here. Certainly, recent reformist movements, which are beginning to gain popularity in Pattamadai and in the region as a whole, seek to rid Islam of its syncretic practices, including the caste-like demarcation of different kinds of Muslims.⁹

Labbai weavers describe their skill as inherited from distant ancestors, as being in the blood. As one weaver said, *indha thozhil enga rathathil oori irukku* (roughly, 'this profession is present in our blood'). However, place is even more important than blood, and the mats take their name from that of the town. The Tamaraparani river flows just outside Pattamadai,

⁹ A detailed discussion of the literature relating to Labbais, Rauthers and other Tamil Muslims and issues of hierarchy among them is beyond the scope of this paper. For in-depth discussions, see Bayly (1989); Fanselow (1997; also 1989); and More (1997). For early ethnographies of Muslims in South India, see Thurston and Rangachari's *Castes and tribes of southern India* (1909).

and on its banks grow the wild plants of *korai* (*Cyperus corymbosus* and *C. pangorei*), the main raw material in weaving. The waters of the Tamara-parani, in which the cut reeds are soaked as part of their preparation, are said to contain special qualities which make it possible to weave the fine mats for which the town is famous. Women who are married to Labbais outside Pattamadai do not weave these mats unless they return to live in the town. However, Labbai women who marry into Pattamadai may start weaving and, as weavers, they are not distinguished in any way from those Labbais born in the town. There are also two Rauthers who weave the high-quality mats. Almost every Labbai in the town claims ownership over mat-weaving whether or not he or she weaves. This is in part a result of the craft development mechanism which recognises Labbais as a 'craft community' such that most members of the group can tap into government funds and schemes allocated for the development of the craft. But there is also an element of pride involved.

Tonnies identified *gemeinschaft*, or communities based on primordial bonds, as pre-modern, inexorably and inevitably to be replaced by *gesellschaft* associations made up of atomised individuals (1974 [1935]). Within the national discourses on craft, artisanal groups are seen as examples of primordial communities with both the advantages and disadvantages of such forms of social organisation. The contradiction is often resolved by the creation of more structured professional associations such as handicraft or handloom co-operative societies, but without losing the community aspect of sociality. In other words, through their emphasis on co-operatives, craft development initiatives seek to create craft associations drawing their members from the 'craft community'. This gives rise to certain irresolvable problems.

First, does the notion of the 'craft community' exist at all within the artisanal group concerned or, as in the case of the mat weavers, is craft practice seen in a different light from the other community structures that I identified earlier—kinship ties, religion, locality, and so on? The ambivalent place that weaving occupies and the frequent movement of people in and out of craft-work (whether in the case of males as migrant labour or females into *beedi* [leaf cigarette] rolling, sewing and other household-based occupations) means that although one is always a Labbai, all Labbais of Pattamadai are not always weavers. Even those who do weave, do not wish to identify themselves in that way, except in certain kinds of situations, such as when seeking access to resources and opportunities from craft development initiatives.

The Labbai Fine Mat Weavers' Co-operative Society today suffers from a lack of working capital and is barely able to buy mats from weavers or sell them. Nevertheless membership offers some important benefits. Despite widespread discontent with the way the Society functions, it is a nodal point through which government funds and aid can be channelled and utilised by Labbais, whether or not they weave. Through the cooperative society, several Labbais who did not own their homes were given land to build houses. These houses, clustered together, are known as the Labbai colony. Most households in the colony own looms, though not all weave. According to one informant, the Society was the only Pattamadai Labbai organisation recognised by the state. It represented their interests and was a way for them to tap into government schemes and opportunities. For this reason, he argued that the Society should not be dissolved, regardless of whether or not it worked to help weavers. His is not an uncommon position. In 1999–2000 the Tirunelveli District Collector sanctioned the building of a weaving shed within the compound of the cooperative as part of a rural infrastructure development programme. Reactions to the shed were telling. One woman said: 'Even if no one uses it for weaving, it can be used as a Labbai marriage hall.'

The second issue is the question of individual agency. Within the paradigm of community, there is little room for the individual agent. However, associations, by definition, are made up of self-interested individuals who must see an advantage in collective action whether it be to enforce collective rules of conduct or for the management of legal, financial or managerial affairs, advocacy, and so on.¹⁰ As mentioned, every Labbai adult in Pattamadai is a member of the Labbai Fine Mat Weavers' Co-operative Society but, as will become clear, commitment to the working of the society is intermittent, mobilised when advantageous and disregarded when not.

Almost every Pattamadai mat starts its social life (Appadurai 1986) as a commodity. Its sale, and the prices offered for it, are crucial for the household subsistence economy. For the weaver-members, the cooperative society must not only buy their mats and offer work-related support, it must also be discriminating—able to recognise skill and reward quality.

¹⁰ See Baviskar and Attwood (1984) for an analysis of the uneven performance of rural cooperatives in India. Though they deal mainly with agricultural cooperatives, their paper sheds interesting light on the successes and failures of institutions in encouraging cooperation within groups of producers.

Cooperative societies, however, are not allowed to pay more for a mat because it is better than one made by another weaver; nor are they allowed to treat weavers differently on the basis of their skill or socioeconomic needs. In other words, theoretically speaking, all members have to be treated in the same way. However, some individuals rise up the ranks of the co-operative organisations and become office-bearers. For this they need a mixture of political savvy, ambition, goodwill and connections. They are rarely able to achieve the last two by treating all members in the same way.

Weavers constantly judge their work against that of others. Weaving is embodied work—weavers pride themselves on the skill in their hands and the keenness of their eyes (*kann nidhanam*) in matching colours and ensuring symmetry in the patterning of the mats. A private mat trader, also a Labbai from Pattamadai, argues that the main reason for the lack of support for the cooperative society is that it fails, indeed cannot but fail, to recognise individual ability. A weaver who stopped selling his mats to the cooperative and has started selling to this trader corroborates the point: 'The trader knows that I am one of the best mat weavers in the town and treats me accordingly. He not only buys all my mats and asks me to weave any special mats he requires but also pays me advances on mats that I have not yet woven.'¹¹ Outsiders, however, see this relationship between trader and weaver differently, attributing it to the 'uncle–nephew relationship' between them. Despite this, the weaver's brother, who claims the same relationship (the trader is the weaver's mother's father's brother's son [MFBS]), did not at the time of this conversation sell mats to the same trader, preferring instead to sell to a non-governmental organisation. Similarly, a weaver who for years had supplied mats to a particular Labbai trader on the grounds that he was closely related to her husband, stopped doing so in 2000 after a disagreement with him. In other words, the idiom of kinship, while cited as an important organising practice both within the mat-weaving industry and more widely, may be mobilised strategically and in the light of other concerns and available options.

Few rivalries in the mat-weaving sphere extend beyond it. In that sense, mat-weaving is bounded. Thus a trader arranged his daughter's marriage with the brother of the vice-president of the Mat Weavers' Co-operative Society. The daughter's husband then went on to open a mat shop, and

¹¹ Interestingly, the man and his wife work on mats jointly, yet he claims individual ownership of them. Not even within this household of two is the sense of self erased.

she began to weave mats for, and also work in, the shop. Relations between the two households continue to be close even though they are business rivals. This raises an interesting point. The theoretical centre of the moral economic approach, as Booth points out (1994), is the essential dichotomy between the embedded economy and the disembedded or autonomous market, where market principles govern the securing of livelihood and are extended into other social relations and institutions. In Pattamadai, while actions, needs and social expectations are informed by the larger Labbai group and by kinship and other bonds, weavers are producing commodities for markets which are distant, and where buyers, moreover, have a particular conception of the moral importance of craft work and craft objects. Both of these—that is, the local and the larger craft worlds—inform interactions within the group as well as the business of producing mats and selling them. There is intense competition within the mat-weaving industry, but also cooperation, for instance in the formation of self-help groups to access microfinance.

Geert de Neve has convincingly argued that, though kinship structures and ideologies have been extensively studied and are at the heart of Indian village ethnographies, the anthropologists' concern with kin relationships in India has rarely been extended to studies of work. De Neve addresses this lack through a focus on the idiom of kin on the shop floor in the dyeing industry of Bhavani in Tamil Nadu (de Neve n.d.). He shows that in the highly unstable work situation of the dyeing units in Bhavani, where work in factories is irregular and the number of workers required varies hugely from month to month, employers use the idiom of kinship, with all its moral connotations of trust, cooperation and reciprocity, to try and bind permanent and short-term workers to them—regardless of whether the workers are biologically related to the employer. The workers, on the other hand, partly resist this. However, they are aware that kinship entails duty and obligation, along with support and patronage, and they use this as a way of making employers take a measure of responsibility for their welfare, asking employers for loans and other kinds of help. This, as de Neve shows, does not mean that workers—whether real or fictive kin of the employer—do not leave their jobs when better prospects offer themselves. As one employer realised to his cost: 'Kinship and its morality are in themselves inadequate tools to command trust and commitment' (ibid.).

De Neve's study goes beyond the static models of caste and kinship to explore the social nature and construction of kinship ties within a volatile, labour-intensive, private sector industry. Very little attention has been

paid to such questions in craft industries. This is partly because craft, in the informal sector of the economy, is seen as fundamentally different to other industries, but also because of craft's ideological (and ahistorical) construction in popular thought. The static kinship and community models continue to be applied uncritically; and indeed, the greatest challenge is seen to be the revival of the functionally integrated ties which were believed to mark traditional craft production and consumption in the pre-colonial period. Furthermore, there are no employees or employers in most home-based craft industries as, theoretically at least, producers own the products of their labour and are paid piece rates for them. Exploitative relations in craft industries are conceptualised as being between middlemen who sell craft products and producers, who are often cast as victims. This is too simplistic, as my discussion of the relations of weavers, traders and the Cooperative Society has shown.

III

Opening avenues: Individuals and their projects

Writing about his experiences as an ethnographer in Tamil Nadu, Mines says:

I have often sensed that the Tamil's world view perceives the person concretely, looking out at the world from the perspective of the self, posing two interconnected questions: 'What is my social context? How shall I act?' (1994: 199).

The individual as social actor is a product of his or her habitus (Bourdieu 1977), conforming to existing social structures in some ways, yet pushing the limits of the possible, opening up new avenues and ways of being which may be adopted or rejected by the wider social grouping. The concept of the craft community obscures the role of individual agents and the ways in which they enrol others in their projects by creating forms of community which, composed as they are of heterogeneous individuals with their own projects, constraints and aspirations, are fluid and open-ended. I now turn to two individuals who, in their different ways, are extremely influential in Pattamadai. The first, A.S. Peer Mohammad (ASP), has carved out a unique space for the mat-weaving industry through his consummate engagement with wider discourses on craft.

This has brought huge publicity to the entire mat-weaving industry, something that even his detractors acknowledge. The other is Khadeeja Beevi (KB). More individualistic in her ambitions, she seeks to do things that mark her out as a powerful woman, whether it is leadership of the town panchayat, exerting influence over a group of weavers, or teaching mat weaving in other Tamil towns. Through these she opens doors hitherto closed to other people, particularly women.¹²

ASP is one of the most prominent mat traders in Pattamadai. He owns a mat shop and employs a tailor, a right-hand man and an odd-job man. His son also helps him run his business. Two of his daughters, one of whom has won a national award for excellence in craft practice, supply him with mats on a regular basis. He also buys mats from other weavers, several of whom sell exclusively to him. ASP is a local big-man. He is the president of the Pattamadai Labbai association, a loose affiliation of adult male Labbais that helps settle disputes within and concerning the group. The Pattamadai Labbai association can only make recommendations, which may or may not be followed. It also owns cooking equipment sufficient for use at weddings and other large feasts, which members can borrow. The association itself meets rarely—though people with problems come to ASP to seek his personal advice or intervention. He sometimes obliges. ASP is also a member of the mosque committee made up of both Labbais and Rauthers. He uses both his personality and his mats to good effect and is a member of open networks within and beyond Pattamadai. For example, he presented a mat to the Sivananda Ashram and gave a talk on religion when the current head of the Divine Life Movement visited the town.¹³ When I once needed a place to stay during a short visit to Pattamadai in 2003, ASP accompanied me to the Sivananda charitable hospital and introduced me as being like his daughter, a helpless female come all the way from England to study the mats. At no point did he make it clear that I had lived in Pattamadai and had been coming to

¹² The question of names has been a difficult one. My work is seen to bring much valued publicity to Pattamadai and everyone I discussed this with was keen that neither their names nor that of the place be changed. While I have retained the name of the place in publications, I have used my discretion with regards to individuals' names. Bundgaard in her work with the Patta painters of Raghurajpur (1999) reports a similar dilemma.

¹³ Swami Sivananda, the founder of the Divine Life Society, was born in Pattamadai in 1887. Even though the movement has its headquarters in Rishikesh in North India, there is a Sivananda Ashram and a charitable hospital in Pattamadai to which many visitors and devotees come.

the town since 1995. 'The swami [religious head of the hospital] knows me,' he said to me, 'and I will speak for you.' I was given a room in the hospital guesthouse.

Outside Pattamadai, ASP is seen as a community leader and 'the head of the family': the family being the Labbai 'craft community'. A member of the Crafts Council of India, a pan-Indian craft development NGO, described him in this way during a discussion about exploitative middlemen in craft industries (conversation with author, Madras, December 1999). She believed that all the weavers were from the same family of which ASP was the head. She thus felt that any benefit to him would reach everyone else. Weavers, however, do not describe ASP in this way. Indeed, when they do refer to him in the context of their mats, they do so using the name of his shop indicating that the relationship is one of buying and selling, though in some instances the gloss of kinship may be added.

I am not the only female from outside Pattamadai whom ASP likens to a daughter. Both the others are members of a non-governmental organisation (NGO) which was active in Pattamadai between 1995 and 2001. This NGO, which I shall call Craft Enterprises, was seeking to develop the mat-weaving industry through building the craft community. Initially the NGO bought mats from traders and sold them outside Pattamadai in a bid to open new markets for the mats and thereby revive the industry. Some weavers, however, wanted to bypass the traders and sell directly to the NGO as they wished, in the words of one weaver, 'to escape from the nets that the traders cast to trap us like fish'. Over time, some weavers returned to working with the traders as they felt this suited them better; others continued to sell directly to the NGO.¹⁴ ASP's relations with Raghunathan of Craft Enterprises, who lived in Pattamadai for a year, were somewhat tense as she and the NGO represented a threat to his position within the industry. At the same time, the NGO also represented a resource which he could tap into, giving him access to other members of the craft world. Also, Craft Enterprises worked with the kind of mat known in Pattamadai as 'super-fine', while ASP mainly dealt in slightly coarser quality mats known as 'fine' mats. They were not therefore in direct competition with each other for goods, only for weavers.

¹⁴ The NGO has now ceased to exist and most weavers are selling mats to the private Labbai traders again, though a few have formed a new co-operative society to which they sell mats when there are orders for them.

This tension between different traders and the NGO came to a dramatic head when the vice-president of the Labbai Fine Mat Weavers' Cooperative Society (or 'Society' as it is commonly known) sought to resume control over the weavers who had started working with the NGO.¹⁵ In May 1998, after Craft Enterprises had been working in Pattamadai for about three years, the Society called for a meeting of all the weavers of super-fine mats and urged them to sell their products exclusively to the Society. Both the prominent mat traders of Pattamadai were at this meeting, even though traders see the cooperative society as a threat and frequently make allegations of corruption against it.¹⁶ Weavers working with Craft Enterprises have also frequently been threatened with eviction from the Society, though this has never happened. Private traders, who are more inimical to the well-being of the Society, rarely face this threat, nor do the weavers who work with them.

The private traders compete with each other for mats and for the loyalty of weavers. Weavers who form part of a trader's household—his wife and children—usually supply mats to him. Others require a mixture of patronage and coercion to continue supplying mats to the same trader. As the bulk of weaving takes place in homes and weavers often own the raw materials they require, they are theoretically free to sell their mats to any buyer. In practice traders constantly seek to limit this freedom. This is done in different ways. For instance, a trader might give a loan to a weaver in times of need, which is then recovered in the form of mats over a period of time. Traders also try and avoid paying a weaver the total sum of money owed for a mat.

They take four or five days to pay you for a mat and you have to keep going to them to collect your money. They also know when you have a new mat on the loom. So when you go to collect your money, they ask about your mat and you cannot say 'no [I will not sell it to you]', as this will delay the payment even more.

Not all weavers are treated in the same way, however. Those who are more skilled than others at weaving patterns or 'writing names' on

¹⁵ The English word 'control' is frequently used by both traders and office-bearers of the Co-operative Society when referring to their relationship with weavers.

¹⁶ Craft Enterprises, Pattamadai project report, April–July 1998.

mats,¹⁷ tend to be paid instantly as traders fear they will begin to sell their mats elsewhere. This fact is recognised by weavers who, when they are able, try and learn extra skills so as to stand out from the others and ensure better treatment. Two weavers living in the same house might be supplying their mats to different traders. Their reasons often include the very different treatment they receive at the respective traders' hands.

Relationships between different private traders are difficult to categorise simply on the basis of professional rivalry. This does exist but, as the description of the cooperative society shows, rivalry may be set aside to make common cause. Indeed the principle of cooperative competition, which marked the brief alliance between traders and the cooperative society, operates here as well. Rivalries may also be hidden in the public sphere, especially when it is advantageous for a trader to emphasise connections rather than competition. In 2003, a women's self-help weaving group closely associated with one of the mat shops presented a mat to the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister who was visiting the nearest large city. The presentation received widespread publicity with pictures of the Chief Minister holding the mat splashed across various local newspapers. One day following this, when I was in his shop, an influential person of the locality phoned to talk about placing an order with ASP. Right at the beginning of the conversation, she asked him if he was responsible for the Chief Minister's gift. ASP, who actually had nothing to do with the gift and who disapproved of the fact that the mat had the Chief Minister's face painted (rather than woven) on it, said: 'We are all related. The gift-giver is my niece (mother's sister's son's daughter) [so it is as if I gave it].' ASP was here using the idea of the craft collective, and more specifically the idiom of kinship, to insert himself into an event that could give him publicity.

ASP is only one of several *thalaivars* or leaders. KB, another Labbai, was the president of the town panchayat in the late 1990s, when the post was reserved for a woman. Referred to as *thalaivar amma* (broadly translatable as 'female leader' or 'leader mother'), she is also a weaver. KB's self-representation, like ASP's, incorporates her successes in the public sphere as the first female president of the panchayat, the recognition she has received in office, and the number of times she has been invited to

¹⁷ The fine fabric of the mats means that it is possible to weave words and intricate patterns in them. Mats with words are especially popular in gifting and wedding presentations. The mat for Queen Elizabeth, for instance, had her name, the name of the weavers' association and Mr. Rangan's name woven in it. Not all weavers are able to make these mats.

important events in other people's lives. This is what Mines terms 'civic individuality' (1994). Again, like ASP, the sense that it is she, an individual with unique skills, who has achieved so much, is never absent. Both ASP and KB have carved out unique social spaces within and beyond the group, and opened up new avenues for other members. Their ideas and actions are extensively discussed, not only within their own households but also outside.

When KB went to Singapore in 2003 to help her husband, who was already there and engaged in writing amulets, leading prayers and telling the fortunes of Tamil Muslims settled in that country, many people were critical of her decision. Several men from Pattamadai have travelled abroad and are engaged in similar activities, but KB was the first Labbai woman from Pattamadai to travel in this way. Heavy debts are incurred to make such trips possible. For her daughters who were left to weave mats and subsist until their parents could generate some money, their mother's actions were the cause of both despair and pride. Some people saw her decision as inspirational. Fathima, who is roughly the same age as KB, said to me: 'She is the first to go and now I will too. She has given me the courage to try.' Fathima may or not be successful in this attempt, but it is important that she sees a new avenue opening up for her on the basis of KB's actions.

ASP, like KB, has extensive networks to help him realise his projects. Indeed, this is one way in which he measures his public and private worth. The projects themselves are varied, from getting me a room in the Sivananda hospital to trying to get a government loan to build a house for his daughter who has been recognised as a master craftperson by the Government of India.¹⁸ When engaging, outside Pattamadai, with the craft worlds made up of development practitioners, government officials, museum staff and buyers, as well as with politicians, ASP uses the idiom of 'craft community' effectively, portraying himself not as an individual trader seeking to earn a livelihood but as someone who works hard to keep the ancient skill of weaving alive, and who has the welfare

¹⁸ ASP's daughter, Ibrahim Beevi, won a national award in 1992. There is some controversy in Pattamadai over this award, with at least one other weaver claiming that it was he who really wove the mat that won her the award. I have also heard weavers say that it was ASP's connections in the craft world and among Pattamadai Brahmins who occupied influential bureaucratic positions in Delhi that ensured the award was given to his daughter. ASP has used the award to create a presence in the media for himself, his daughter and Pattamadai in general. Most people within and outside Pattamadai refer to the award as ASP's.

of the entire group at heart. The idiom of kinship is crucial in his public speech acts as he emphasises his role as mentor and guiding elder to the entire group, especially the women who constitute the majority of weavers. Larger discourses on Muslim women focus on their invisibility in the public sphere and the restrictions placed on them. To a certain extent, and for many female weavers, this is true—though as we saw in the case of Khadija and Fathima, there are notable exceptions. Like Labbai males, some women are more visible than others, despite the fact that different gender-based expectations underpin their actions and self-representations and inform their civic individuality. ASP's role as spokesperson for the mat-weaving community, and his interactions with the discourses on Muslim women, however, have the partial effect of reifying them and informing development practice in Pattamadai.

It is important to reiterate that people accept ASP as a leader not only because he is responsible for providing, through his shop, a means of livelihood for several weaving households. His presence in several networks within and beyond Pattamadai is equally important, as are his interactions with individual Labbais. Weavers who supply mats to him complain of his attempts to control the products of their labour. Equally, however, he is able to open up opportunities for weavers through his connections. A mat woven by Saad Ali and sold to ASP was bought by the Crafts Council of India, which proceeded to send it as an entry to an international craft awards competition. This mat won an award. ASP was quick to emphasise that the weaver was his kin and that his own daughter had won a national award. As a newspaper article said of Saad Ali's award: 'Winning awards is not a new thing for Mr Peer Mohammad.'¹⁹ Each successful project increases ASP's standing as a person who can do things—this applies to personal projects as well as those undertaken on behalf of others.

IV *Conclusion*

I returned to Pattamadai in 2003 with an exhibition catalogue and posters of an exhibition I had curated at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (see Venkatesan 2002a).²⁰ I also had

¹⁹ 'Reporters diary' in the *Hindu*, 11 December 2000.

²⁰ 'Crafting culture: Pattamadai mats from south India' was on display from March 2002 to December 2003.

with me a video of the mat-making process that was on display at the exhibition.²¹ Both catalogue and video received mixed responses. Their value was in the publicity given to the mat-weaving industry, and most weavers and traders were quick to appreciate this. But the mat-weaving industry, as I have shown, is made up of different kinds of individuals who are in competition with each other as well. People whose images did not appear in either video or catalogue were keen to know the reason for their exclusion.

ASP, whose shop featured in the exhibition poster, had the poster framed and displayed in his shop, though he was displeased that his face was hidden by a mat he was holding. One woman said of a weaver whose photo appeared more than once in the catalogue illustrating weaving processes: 'It is clear whom you like.' Watching the video, several viewers immediately recognised one weaver whose hands were the only thing visible as she threaded a weft strand through the warp: 'That is Regina. She is the only person who takes so much care in twisting the weft strand before she inserts it into the warp.'

While the processes of weaving involve a certain amount of cooperation—few mat weavers work entirely alone—weavers rarely claim that their mats are a collective product (at least, outside of the immediate household). Every person in the chain, whether weaver or trader, claims unique ownership of the mat or of key aspects of its material existence. This is because the mats are viewed as a means to an end—earning a livelihood or achieving certain social goals through getting awards, reaching out to influential people, succeeding in giving a gift to a politician and therefore allying one's name to that of an important person, and so on. In some cases, the whole group benefits; in others, and during the commodity stage of the object, the benefit is restricted to the individual or household.

My ethnography does not bear out the negation of both individuality and individualism among craft producers; indeed it forces a critical re-examination of the concept of 'craft community'. In this article I have highlighted the dynamic of individual interests and efforts that constantly reshape relationships and alliances among weavers and traders. The notion of community tends to obscure this dynamic process of constant change. While the individual is a social actor, he or she is also a person who tries to maximise social and economic gain without sacrificing the sense of

²¹ The five-minute silent video 'Making mats' was made by Vipul Sangoi and Soumhya Venkatesan on the basis of footage filmed in March 2001.

belonging that comes from being part of a group. While neither KB nor ASP challenge unspoken rules that govern everyday life and more important events, both exercise considerable skill in creating opportunities which extend beyond the local group and in managing facets of their identities. This causes concern, especially among their close families, and occasions comment outside. At the same time it opens up opportunities for others. How they then manage these opportunities depends on their skills as well as on structural factors.

Access to financial and social resources, behaviour, and membership in different kinds of networks all contribute to the efficaciousness of certain individuals. This is clear from the failure of another national award-winning weaver in Pattamadai to set up a shop like ASP's and to create a media presence for himself on the basis of the award. Abdul, who received his national award in 1996, did not have the same standing in Pattamadai as ASP, nor did he successfully manage to integrate others, both within and outside Pattamadai, in his projects. Within Pattamadai, he was not seen as someone who could or would successfully help others. In the craft worlds, unlike ASP, Abdul emphasised his personal successes and skills. He made little reference either to the craft community or to his desire to help other 'helpless weavers'. This is something ASP constantly emphasises in the public sphere, even in the case of projects pertaining only to himself or his own children. Despite the advantages conferred by the national award, including the opportunity to attend craft bazaars and sell his own and others' products and the chance to run training schemes to teach others the craft skill, Abdul could not, as ASP says, 'become like me even though he tried'. Abdul has now left both Pattamadai and mat weaving and works in a nearby town.

I have argued in this paper that neither the substantivist nor constructivist conceptualisations of community fully explain the dynamic and shifting nature of the mat-weaving industry in Pattamadai. Both the state and public sphere construct notions of the craft community, especially in development discourse and practice. Weavers and traders engage with these in the public sphere and, indeed, have little choice but to do so if they wish to benefit from craft development programmes. This also affects local organising practices as individuals ally themselves for periods of time with those who are efficacious within the craft worlds. However, these alliances may break down if individuals do not see the continuing benefits of working together. Alliances may also end if one or more constituent members feel they are not valued or treated fairly. This does not mean that all relations between the people come to an end. Women's

choices are more circumscribed than men's for, unlike men, most women are restricted to working within their homes. Every adult member's earnings are important to the household's subsistence. A woman may thus stop working with one trader and start selling her mats to another; or she may give up mat weaving altogether and start rolling leaf cigarettes (*beedis*), or take up sewing work.

Is it a surprise that community-building attempts based around craft practice rarely work? Surely this is not, as the development discourses would have it, the result of the breakdown of communities in the wake of, first, colonisation, and then industrialisation. Neither is it because craft communities are traditional and static, and unable to adjust to a changing world. As I have shown, the mat-weaving industry in Pattamadai is shifting and dynamic. It is the idealised notion of the craft community that is the problem, failing as it does to take into account the elements of cooperative competition which characterise craft industries such as that of Pattamadai. The Labbais of Pattamadai are all related to each other, many of them in multiple ways. This relatedness is an important organising principle, though precisely which relations are emphasised is highly context-dependent. Thus, even kinship, often conceived of too simplistically, is subject to strategic considerations within, although not solely in the context of, the craft industry. I argue in this article for a more nuanced understanding of weavers' lives and the choices they make, one which takes into account not only constraints, but also creativity, aspirations and agency—both individual and collective.

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